

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 NEA-10 ISO-00 PM-05 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15
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FM AMEMBASSY VALLETTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8348
INFO AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY ROME
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
USMISSION USNATO
USDOCOSOUTH NAPLES IT

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VALLETTA 02319

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, MT, UK
SUBJECT: MINTOFF'S DISPUTE WITH UK OVER BRITISH FORCES
- BROADCASTING FACILITY STALEMATED

REFS: A) VALLETTA 2168 (DTG 151315Z JUL 78)
- B) VALLETTA 2117 (DTG 121032Z JUL 78)

1. ACCORDING TO OUR BRITISH COLLEAGUES, MINTOFF'S DISPUTE WITH THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT OVER BBC AND BRITISH PRESS COVERAGE OF EVENTS IN MALTA HAS BECOME STALEMATED. MINTOFF LAST WEEK LAID DOWN FOUR "CLARIFICATIONS" WHICH HE DEMANDED THAT THE BRITISH PRESS AND BBC IN PARTICULAR PUBLICIZE BEFORE HE WOULD WITHDRAW HIS BAN ON BRITISH JOURNALISTS AND ALLOW THE REOPENING OF THE BRITISH FORCES BROADCASTING SERVICE (BFBS). THESE CLARIFICATIONS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

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- A) BBC HAD INTERVIEWED MINTOFF IN MARCH, 1977 BUT HAD NEVER BROADCAST THAT INTERVIEW.

- B) THERE WAS NO CONNECTION BETWEEN THE BAN ON BRITISH JOURNALISTS AND MISS MINTOFF'S ARREST FOR HER DISRUPTION OF A SITTING OF THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT.

- C) THE GOM HAD NEVER OFFERED TO DO A DEAL WITH HMG ON THE GAUL (BRITISH NATIONAL IN MALTA) AND DELIA (MALTESE NATIONAL IN BRITAIN) EXTRADITION CASES.

- D) THE FOREIGN OFFICE IN LONDON HAD NEVER SAID THAT IT CONDEMNED THE BANNING OF BRITISH JOURNALISTS AS REPORTED BY BBC BUT RATHER THAT IT "REGRETTED" THIS ACTION BY THE GOM.

THE FOREIGN OFFICE HAS TRIED TO PERSUADE THE BBC TO COMPLY IN SOME WAY WITH THESE DEMANDS BUT THE BBC HAS FIRMLY REFUSED. BBC DID, HOWEVER, OFFER TO INTERVIEW MINTOFF ON A MAJOR TV PROGRAM. THIS MINTOFF HAS REFUSED TO AGREE TO UNTIL THE FOUR CLARIFICATIONS HAVE BEEN PUBLICIZED.

2. IN THE MEANWHILE, THE GOM HAS NOT RESPONDED TO THE BRITISH PROTEST NOTE (REF A) AND, IN THE VIEW OF THE BRITISH HERE, IS NOT LIKELY TO DO SO.

3. WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IS NOT AT ALL CLEAR. OUR BRITISH COUNTERPARTS DO NOT EXPECT HMG TO FORCE THE ISSUE, AT LEAST FOR THE TIME BEING, BECAUSE THEY DO NOT SEE THE SUBSTANTIVE IMPLICATIONS OF THE CLOSURE OF BFBS AS ALL THAT SERIOUS, SUMMER VACATION TIME IS HERE, AND PREOCCUPATION WITH DOMESTIC ISSUES IN THE UK WILL INCREASE AS AN OCTOBER ELECTION BECOMES MORE AND MORE LIKELY.
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4. AS THE BRITISH HERE SEE IT THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF MINTOFF'S CLOSURE OF BFBS IS THAT IT CALLS INTO QUESTION THE MILITARY FORCES AGREEMENT (MFA) AS A RELIABLE SAFEGUARD OF BRITISH RIGHTS DURING THE REMAINDER OF THE DISENGAGEMENT. ANOTHER IMPORTANT QUESTION IS WHETHER THE CLOSURE IS A SUFFICIENTLY SERIOUS VIOLATION OF THE MFA TO WARRANT NON-PAYMENT OF THE LAST INSTALLMENT OF RENT FOR THE BRITISH BASE WHICH IS DUE OCTOBER 1. THIS IS A LEGAL QUESTION WHICH MAY ALSO REQUIRE AN INPUT FROM APPROPRIATE NATO OFFICIALS. RECOGNIZING THAT BRITAIN WILL HAVE TO HAVE A KEY ROLE IN RESOLVING THIS ISSUE, OUR BRITISH COLLEAGUES DOUBT THAT PUBLIC OR PARLIAMENTARY OPINION WILL FORCE HMG TO TAKE A HARD LINE. THEIR PRESENT THINKING IS THAT, PROVIDING MINTOFF DOES NOTHING FURTHER TO CONTRAVENE THE MFA, HMG WOULD PROBABLY PREFER TO HAVE THE PAYMENT MADE, IN RETURN FOR AN ORDERLY PHASEOUT OF THE BASE - EVEN IF BFBS REMAINS CLOSED DURING THIS PERIOD.

5. AS TO MINTOFF'S MOTIVES, THE BRITISH ARE NOW PERSUADED THAT, APART FROM GENUINE IRRITATION WITH BRITISH PRESS REPORTING ON MALTESE AFFAIRS, MINTOFF DID NOT

JUST "FLY OFF THE HANDLE" IN CLOSING BFBS BUT RATHER HAD
THOUGHT HIS APPROACH THOUGH IN ADVANCE WITH TWO BASIC
OBJECTIVES IN MIND:

- A) BY SHUTTING DOWN BFBS HE WOULD DEMONSTRATE TO
THE EUROPEANS, PARTICULARLY GERMANY, FRANCE AND ITALY,
THAT HE IS PREPARED TO BITE AS WELL AS BARK.
- B) HE ALSO WANTED TO ELIMINATE THE LAST INDEPENDENT
ENGLISH LANGUAGE RADIO NEWS SERVICE ON THE ISLAND. THEY
NOTE THAT HE TERMINATED LOCAL (MALTESE) RADIO BBC NEWS
SERVICE SOME MONTHS AGO.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 VALLETTA 02319

IN ADDITION, THEY BELIEVE THAT MINTOFF PROBABLY CALCULATED
THAT HE COULD CLOSE BFBS AND STILL OBTAIN HIS LAST RENTAL
PAYMENT, REASONING THAT CLOSURE OF BFBS IS A RELATIVELY
MINOR STEP WHICH THE BRITISH WOULD BE INCLINED TO OVERLOOK
IN THE INTERESTS OF AN OTHERWISE ORDERLY PHASEOUT OF THE
BASE.

6. OUR BRITISH COLLEAGUES REPORTED THAT A SENIOR GOM
CIVIL SERVANT RECENTLY SAW TO IT THAT THE BRITISH WERE
MADE AWARE OF THE ALLEGED RESULTS OF THE MEETINGS THE HIGH-
LEVEL MALTESE DELEGATION RECENTLY HAD IN TRIPOLI (SEE REF

A). ACCORDING TO THIS OFFICIAL, QADHAFI AGREED TO PAY THE LM 7,000,000 IF NATO FAILED TO DO SO. THE BRITISH TEND TO DOUBT THAT MINTOFF WILL PICK UP THIS OFFER (ASSUMING IT IS GENUINE), EXCEPT AS A LAST RESORT (I.E., NATO REALLY DOESN'T PAY) AND BELIEVE THAT MINTOFF MADE SURE THAT THEY WERE TOLD ABOUT IT AS A MEANS OF INCREASING PRESSURE ON CONFIDENTIAL

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THE BRITISH AND NATO TO PAY UP REGARDLESS OF WHAT HAPPENED ON BFBS. THEY REASON THAT MINTOFF IS LOATH TO FOREGO LM 7 MILLION FROM THE WEST AND MAY TRY TO GET SOMETHING LIKE THAT FROM QADHAFI ANYWAY, SAY BY PUSHING THE BRITISH OUT SHORTLY AFTER OCTOBER 1.

7. COMMENT: WE GENERALLY AGREE WITH THE BRITISH ANALYSIS OF MINTOFF'S MOTIVES. HE HAS PROBABLY FELT FOR SOME TIME THAT HE HAD TO DO SOMETHING SUFFICIENTLY OBNOXIOUS TO GET THE ATTENTION OF EUROPE - A TACTIC HE HAS USED IN THE PAST. THE QUESTION OF HOW NATO RESPONDS TO MINTOFF'S CLOSURE OF BFBS (ASSUMING AS THE BRITISH NOW TEND TO, THAT THE CLOSURE IS PERMANENT) DESERVES SOME THOUGHT ON OUR PART. WHILE THE BRITISH OBVIOUSLY SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD, IT WOULD BE HELPFUL TO US HERE IF WE HAD A PRELIMINARY VIEW AS TO THE LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF MINTOFF'S CLOSURE OF BFBS, PARTICULARLY AS IT RELATES TO THE RENTAL PAYMENT SCHEDULED FOR OCTOBER 1. AT THIS STAGE, AND PROVIDED MINTOFF DOES NOTHING FURTHER IN VIOLATION OF THE MFA, WE ARE INCLINED TO GO ALONG WITH THE BRITISH VIEW HERE THAT THE RENTAL PAYMENT BE MADE; (A) TO INSURE THAT THE BRITISH BASE PHASEOUT PROCEEDS AS SMOOTHLY AND AMICABLY AS POSSIBLE AND (B) TO DO ALL WE CAN (WITHIN REASON) TO DELAY MINTOFF'S "IMMUTABLE DECISION". IN OTHER WORDS, WE SHOULD TRY TO GIVE HIM AS MUCH TIME AS POSSIBLE TO LOOK BEFORE HE LEAPS. THE PROBLEM WITH THIS IS THAT HE CAN TAKE NATO'S MONEY ON OCTOBER 1 AND TOSS THE BRITISH OUT ON OCTOBER 2, A POSSIBILITY THAT HAS TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY. WE HOPE TO HAVE A CLEARER PICTURE OF MINTOFF'S INTENTIONS AFTER JULY 31. UNTIL THEN WE PREFER TO RESERVE JUDGMENT. LAINGEN

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